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Editorial: Fox opens up debates to all

In 2007, the Republican Party was faced with a dilemma it hadn't encountered in a while. President George W. Bush was finishing his second term, and Dick Cheney became the first vice president since Spiro Agnew to decline to run for the White House.

With no incumbent to speak of, the field was wide open. Then came the primary debates. The task of fitting all 12 announced candidates on stage at once proved too cumbersome. At its zenith, the debate stage only held 10 of them at once.

This mess repeated itself four years later in 2011 after the 2008 election of Democratic President Barack Obama. Again, the Republicans were left without a clear front-runner and a swollen roster of hopefuls. By the time the debates rolled around, the field was set at 10, while just eight made it to the stage at once at the height of the campaign season. This was another logistical nightmare. Obama won re-election handily.

Imagine the party bosses' horror to find that as of this writing there are 17 announced Republican candidates for president in 2016. (It

was at 16 until Former Virginia Gov. Jim Gilmore announced his candidacy on Thursday.)

Seeing another clown car on the horizon, Fox News Channel hinged admittance to the debate stage on who had the averaged highest poll numbers as of two days before the debate. After an outcry, Fox relented.

“Fox News is opening its 5 p.m. debate to all the announced Republican candidates who fail to make the cut for the Aug. 6 prime-time event, removing a requirement that participants reach at least 1 percent in polling,” reported Politico’s Mike Allen on Tuesday. “The change amounts to an insurance policy for candidates who were in danger of being disqualified from the vital first debate based on low polls. ... The announcement by Michael Clemente, Fox News executive vice president of news, means that all 16 announced candidates will qualify for Cleveland — either the 5 p.m. undercard, or the 9 p.m. main event. The 9 p.m. debate will include the 10 candidates with the highest average in national polls, as determined by Fox News. The 5 p.m. forum will now include all the rest.”

This strategy is an improvement on the previously announced system, but it’s not perfect. It’s better that the lower-polling candidates are

allowed at all, but separating it into two debates still ghettoizes them and makes their candidacies appear less credible.

Still, grab the popcorn because it's going to be the most entertaining show on TV this week.